

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: WILLIAN FERREIRA FAHLBERG [BRAZIL]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

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C = CHRISTOPH

W = WILLIAN

Tape 08.29

C: If you could state your name, where you live in Lowell, your ethnic background, your approximate age and when you came to the United States.

W: My name is Willian Ferreira. I came to the United States in 1996, at age fifteen. Now I am twenty-seven. I have been living in Lowell for the past eight months.

C: I want to talk a little bit about your migration history. Was it your parents that wanted to come to the United States? Were you involved in that?

W: I was involved. I wanted to live the American dream. My father came in 1988. He lived in the United States for five and a half years. He moved back to Brazil in the beginning of 1994. Back then I was fourteen. I was raised without my father and just because he was here. We would send pictures. It was amazing... oh the United States. I was born in Sapal, but raised in a small town that had no more than six thousand people. Then seeing the pictures, I thought I wanted to go to the United States – Boston. That opportunity came when I was fifteen. My parents applied for a visa and I was able to get a visa. Back then my dad was like “Do you really want to go?” “I was there for five years and it is not as easy as it seems.” But then my best friend had just gone and I was like “yes.” Back then my parents had financial issues.

C: So also then from your family there was some economic need?

W: Yes. Living in a small town.... I was in high school but it was almost impossible to go to college. My parents owned a butcher shop and I worked for them since I was seven

or eight. When my father came back, the butcher shop was not doing well; so they decided to close it. I was going around looking for a job and could not find one. I tried to sell ice cream on the streets. I shined shoes for a little while. But it wasn't working. My best friend was working as a mechanic. I was making like ten dollars a month. He came here three months before me. The first week he made four hundred dollars. He gave me a call and told me.... I was like "what!" Back in the 1990's everyone was "lets go to the United States." Brazil was not doing well. The whole country wasn't doing well.

C: You talked briefly about your preconceptions of the United States. Can you talk about that a little bit? What were some of the things you imagined the US being like? And once you got here did that change?

W: Yes, it definitely changed. When I first came I stayed fourteen days in Miami, which was cool. The first twelve days were the best of my entire life. I was staying in a hotel, we came as a group of two hundred youths and I meet all these people, we were going to the park everyday, the movies at night. I was like this is the best place in the world. When I left Miami and came to Boston to live with my uncle and my aunt. When I arrived there, that changed. We were seven people living in a basement with one tiny bedroom. My uncle and my aunt were staying in that one because they had a new born. In the living room, which was connected to the kitchen, and which was pretty small probably like a ten by ten the most; was me, my cousin, my best friend and his parents. So we were seven people in a tiny room. The bathroom was tiny. The first night I took a shower, I was crying like "what am I doing here." Back in Brazil our house was nice. It was big. I had my own room. My parents had their own room, and my sisters had her room. It was kind of shocking.

C: Did you come for both work and education?

W: Primarily for work. Education actually came three years ago, after I met my wife.

C: Did you earn your GED?

W: Well I dropped out of high school when I came. For the first two years I was working two jobs. I was working eighty five hours. I got a job as a bus boy at a place where I am still working today. They actually liked me a lot and said "if you learn the language you would be able to be a server." So I decided to go to high school. So I went to High School in Roxbury. It didn't last long. I was there for ten months. I was going to class Monday thru Friday, 7:15 to 1:45. I was working six nights a week and it was hard to do homework. Also in Roxbury there were only twenty five to thirty five Brazilian students and for some reason Latino's didn't like us. African Americans which were ninety-five percent of the students didn't like us. One of my best friends got beaten up. I was going to get beaten up. They were following me every single day. So, I would start leaving class early. Instead of leaving at 1:45 we would go home at like 1:25. The cop was waiting for me at the T station. So I never got beaten up. But I was afraid. I quit and dropped out.

C: So there was a lot of ethnic tension between African Americans, Hispanics and Brazilians?

W: Yes and we were the minority.

C: Did you try to build a Brazilian community to try to protect each other or was it just hopeless?

W: It was hopeless. We only had one Brazilian teacher there and another Brazilian worked there who was not a teacher. But they both hated each other. We had no resources and help whatsoever. In our class only three [Brazilians] graduated. The others all dropped out.

C: No surprise there.... You had discrimination that you experienced in school. Did you experience discrimination at work or in other situations?

W: I hear a lot from friends, but personally I did not suffer any discrimination besides when I went to school.

C: What are your friends talking about, if you don't mind me asking?

W: Well a big issue is that they don't speak English so when they apply for a job or when they are at work they are being abused. There are people that are putting them down.

C: So mostly language issues?

W: Yes, mostly language issues.

C: So you came to Miami, then lived in Boston, and eventually you ended up in Lowell?

W: Yes, I just moved to Lowell last summer.

C: How do you like Lowell?

W: I like it. It is a diverse city. Walking downtown Lowell you see a lot of Brazilians, Latinos, Asians, Caucasians, African Americans. I am still learning the city but I like it.

C: Are there specific Brazilian businesses that you go to or restaurants that you like?

W: There is a restaurant called Oasis that I like. I go there as much as I can. But I have a huge family and most of them live in Boston and Manchester. So on my days off I am either in Boston with them or in Manchester with my other family or at my house and barbecue.

C: Do you consider yourself as part of a neighborhood in Lowell or has that not shown up yet?

W: Not yet, but last fall I started coaching soccer for the Lowell travel team and that has helped me to meet a lot of people. Right now we don't have soccer during the winter break. I am coaching soccer at the Boys and Girls Club where I volunteer. So I am starting to volunteer there. I attend UMass Lowell now so I am starting to get to know people.

C: How many jobs do you have besides going to school full-time?

W: Right now I am a full-time student taking five classes a semester and I am working three to four shifts a week in Boston. So I have to commute. I am coaching soccer a couple of days a week at the Boys and Girls Club, and starting next month I will coach the travel team.

C: How long is your commute to Boston?

W: It takes about forty minutes. I have to be there at 4:00 and on the way back I leave work at 12 or 1:00 and there is no traffic.

C: Do you have some friends in Lowell and if so where do they live?

W: I have my wife and her parents, but I have no relatives besides them in Lowell. I am starting to get to know people now.

C: How long have you been married?

W: About two years.

C: Have you been able to go back to Brazil at all?

W: No because my application for the green card is pending, and actually I have been waiting for six years.

C: Six years!

W: Yes, at first I applied through my work. I had some issues with my application. Then I got married and I filed another application. So now I have one application that was approved and I have one that I am trying to close. So it's kind of pending.

C: Have you been getting help from outsiders with that?

W: Yes, I am trying. The immigration system in the United States.... One day I go there and they give you one piece of information and then two days later you get a totally different answer. It is misleading.

C: I had issues too – not as big as yours!

W: Some stuff doesn't make sense. I spend all this money. I am waiting all this time. They don't want me to leave this country. If I am applying for the green card it's because I want to stay here. I lost my grandfather last weekend in Brazil. I could not go to see him. My other grandfather, I lost three years ago and I could not go see him either. My mother is here right now on vacation. I am afraid though one day that if one of my parents passes away, I will not be able to go see them either, or if they get sick....

C: It sounds just awful.... I am really sorry.... Do you call back to Brazil to stay in touch with your parents? What about email.

W: We call often. My parents don't own a computer.

C: Where do you consider your home now? Is it Brazil? The United States? If you were to call yourself something would you call yourself an American or a Brazilian or a Brazilian American? How do you define yourself?

W: Most of the time I say I am a Brazilian American because I lived in Brazil for fifteen years and I have been in the US for twelve years. I think those twelve years have been much more important than those fifteen years. So I will probably say Brazilian American.

C: Where do you consider your home? Brazil? The US? Both?

W: I would probably say both. I don't know. Probably more the US. In twelve years, now I know the country. I see myself in the future either living in Brazil or here. It will all depend on what career I am going to follow and what career my wife will follow. We first were planning to move to Africa but now we are leaning toward Brazil. But there is a high chance that we will stay here too. It all depends on opportunities.

C: Let's talk a little bit about language. Around the house do you speak mostly English or Portuguese or both?

W: Mostly Portuguese with my wife. She is American but she lived in Brazil for eight years. She speaks Portuguese fluently. We pretty much speak Portuguese and English. But with her parents I speak English and my family and I, we speak Portuguese.

C: Do you find it much easier that your wife is a Portuguese speaker but also that she lived in Brazil? Do you find that it makes the relationship easier sometimes?

W: It sometimes helps because she understands a lot about Brazilian culture. I think it helps. I dated some American girls before and there were some issues because of the different cultures. It helps a lot.

C: If you decide to have kids would you want them to learn Portuguese as well?

W: Yes, both. We don't have any kids yet but we plan to have them in four to five years. I want to finish school first and I want to go to graduate school. I am not rushing it, but if one day we have a kid we will definitely want them to speak at least Portuguese and English. It is very important.

C: Is there anything else other than language that you would like to pass on?

W: What I find about Brazilians especially about my family we are very united. Every week end we are together. We are very warm with each other and friendly. I want to keep that with my kids. Last weekend we had a party and we had twenty-five people. At a Christmas party we have fifty-five to seventy-five family members and some friends. So those traditions I want to keep and I want my kids to be able to enjoy that as well. It is important to be surrounded by family.

C: Is your wife done with school?

W: She just graduated last May. That is the reason why we moved to Lowell. She got a job at the Rape Crisis Center. We were living in Somerville when she went to Tufts. After she graduated, she got the job and we moved to Lowell. Right now she is working and waiting for me to finish my undergrad so that she can go to grad school. Hopefully in two years.

C: What is she thinking about going to Grad school for, Social Work?

W: Yes, she majored in peace, justice and international relations. She loves working with women's rights. She knows a little bit about business. She wants to create a non-profit organization in the future. So she might get a degree related to business.

C: You both are interested in nonprofit work?

W: That is something we plan on doing: non-profit/social work. I am having a lot of fun working for the Boys and Girls Club. Right now my goal for the future is to open an after school program. I worked as a liaison in Lowell three years ago for the Brazilian community. I found out that many Brazilian kids that go to middle school are not going to class. The main reason is that the parents are working eighty-five to one hundred hours a week. The parents are never home. The kids are never going to school because the parents think that they are in class but actually they are at home. The parents do not speak the language so they cannot help their kids with the homework. There are a lot of issues. I hope when I am done with school I can start a project. I also believe in the power of sports, especially soccer, to help kids.

C: Do you go to any church?

W: Not right now. My wife and I are looking for a church. We have been to at least six in Lowell. We are still looking around to see.

C: What kind of churches did you check out?

W: Mostly protestant. We go to one a month. We have not decided yet.

C: Is religion and church important to you?

W: Yes.

C: Why do you think it is important to you?

W: In Brazil we went to church every Sunday morning. When I came to this country, there was no church in Portuguese and then I had to work on Sundays. I think it is important to go at least once a week. My parents keep asking me every week if I have gone to church. The pressure is on. My mom just asked which church I go to.

C: Is there pressure too that it has to be Catholicism? Or they just want you to go to church?

W: My parents are very open-minded.

C: Who would you turn to if you needed help? Like if some emergency happens, who would you call for help? Is it your Brazilian family? Or your wife's family? Or both?

W: Depends on what kind of help. Emotional help I would go to my family if I need any other kind of help I would probably go to my wife's parents because they are Americans and they know the laws. Any kind of emotional help I would go to my family.

C: It sounds like you are very close.... Do you play soccer in a team as well, not just coach?

W: I used to but now, being a full-time student, working, there is just no time.... I love kids and coaching the kids it is pretty much the same feeling as playing soccer.

C: Is there anything else besides coaching soccer that you do with your time? Watch TV? Listen to music, go out dancing?

W: I am a big sports fan. I like football, baseball, basketball... actually sports helped me a lot in this country. When I came in 96, there were no Brazilian channels. We had cable but all the channels were in English. I could not understand what they were saying. But I could watch a basketball game and I knew the rules so I didn't have to understand the language. The sport helped me a lot.

C: Does your wife like sports too?

W: She is getting used to it.

C: Have you been able to go on vacations at all?

W: Actually we went to Hawaii for our honeymoon, which was awesome. For the past two years that was the only one. I have to pay my tuition.

C: So your mom has come to visit. Have other family members come to visit you from Brazil?

W: Well both my sisters are here. My older sister is here. She has two kids – one new born. My younger sister is getting married at the beginning of next month. My mother came two weeks ago. My dad is coming next week. Both came for the wedding.

C: When they come to visit, how long do they usually stay?

W: One to two months. Normally my mother stays a little longer than my dad because my dad has to take care of the business back in Brazil.

C: What does he do back home in Brazil?

W: They own land. So they take care of the land. He also owns a cab. So he has someone who drives the taxi. He owns a few houses and he has to take care of them. He worked for so many years for like a hundred hours a week. So now he is living the life.

C: He was able to build the houses because he came to the United States.

W: Yes. This is his piece to take care of him in old age.

C: What radio stations or TV do you watch? Is there a Brazilian station?

W: We have a Brazilian channel on TV. There are Brazilian radio stations but I don't listen to them. I have my CDs. ESPN and CNN to see who is going to win the presidency.

C: So you follow politics?

W: I am trying to learn about it.

C: That's a good sag-way into our next set of questions, about power and politics. Have you got into local politics too?

C: No I haven't.... I haven't been here long.

C: Have you been to the museums in downtown?

W: Actually no. My wife and I have been planning to take one day and go walk about.

C: Do you know that the National Park is downtown? And when you are in a Brazilian establishment that people know about the park in downtown?

W: I don't think people know about it.

C: You are still new to the community but have you ever seen flyers?

W: Yes I have.

C: Are they hanging in immigrant businesses, or do you come across them when you are walking around in downtown?

W: Yes, when I am walking around downtown.

C: Do you think that the Brazilians know about the folk festival and they go?

W: There were a lot of Brazilians, there but I think there are still a lot of Brazilians that don't know about it.

C: So obviously you went to the folk festival. Are there other festivals that you go to? Holy Ghost Festivals? Water Festival?

W: No, I haven't been able to.

C: If there is one thing you could change about your experience as an immigrant what would that be?

W: I wouldn't have come to this country at fifteen years old. I would have waited until I was eighteen or twenty one. I probably would have taken an English course in Brazil so at least know a little bit of the language.

C: What kind of advice would you give to an immigrant that comes to Lowell about the city or to the United States in general? If you had one, two, or three pieces of advice to people coming to this country?

W: I have some friends back in Brazil. They want to come because they still believe that once they get here they can live the American dream. But the United States has changed. Now to get a job, to earn a lot of money, to pay your rent, utilities, and save money, it is almost impossible. I tell them try to do something in Brazil. Try to go to school. Try to invest in Brazil. I am not saying the United States is not doing well. But for immigrants right now I don't think it is good. If you come here without the language, without papers and no money; it is just going to be a hassle.

C: Do you feel like there have been less Brazilians that have come to the United States for that reason? Also because the Brazilian economy has been doing better?

W: I work in Boston. There are a lot of Brazilians working in Boston. I had at least ten friends of mine who left the end of last year and I know for certain thousands and thousands just left and went back home.

C: Is that because the dollar is too weak?

W: The dollar is too weak. They cannot make enough money. They are better off going back to Brazil.

Christoph: I have been hearing that from other Brazilians as well. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. I feel like I learned a lot.